

# Introduction

## No Beached Whales

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Whenever exception—as in “a special issue”—frames the context of scholarly inquiry, it’s important to ask about what’s different. After all, special implies, among other things, something unusual or out of the ordinary. And what, precisely, is unusual about talking about black gender and sexuality? In general terms? In the context of this journal?

This “special” issue embodies an attempt to mark black gender and sexuality as fields that are special without being inevitable. That is, we do not seek to consolidate or reproduce many of the most widely circulated iterations of black bodies and desires, or to situate them in stable locations (filial, political, geographic). This is not to suggest that past or present studies of black genders and sexualities have only reproduced stereotypes or fixed the range of identifications and practices that fall under the rubric of gender and sexuality. Indeed, the past three decades have given rise to challenging, critical scholarship on questions of gender and sexuality throughout the African diaspora. Yet, at the same time, we have been struck by the way so much of the scholarly literature on black gender and sexuality is so largely focused on racism, and the ways racism operates as both cause and effect, at once determining black gender and sexual deviance and emerging as an effect of that deviance. Are the range of black gender performatives, affinal bonds, emotions, and sexual practices, and their links to larger U.S. political economies, necessarily overdetermined by racist ideologies? We can gesture here toward a range of

work that cuts across historical and interdisciplinary sites (Moynihan 1965; Gilman 1985; Cosby and Poussaint 2007). While we are attuned to the ongoing salience of racism, we did not explicitly seek out work that grappled with it as its central analytic lens. Rather, we sought to capitalize on what we view as an ongoing disruptive momentum in black studies and emergent black queer studies. Our goal was to locate the strongest new scholarship in black gender and sexuality both in the United States and abroad. And while normative heterosexualities certainly fall under this rubric (see below), we were more interested in, among other things, new definitions of the alphabet soup: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersexed LGBT(Q,I); critical approaches to activism and sexuality; neoliberalism and black sexuality; race, sexuality, and affect; sexual citizenship; and/or gender and performativity.

To say that we were interested in work that didn't reproduce black genders and sexualities as overdetermined by racist ideologies is not to say that we were especially interested or invested in what is increasingly, though sometimes mistakenly, called a post-racial politics. Rather, we sought lateral movements away from those trends in which black bodies and desires have been made congruent with, or in resistance to, cultural pathology and social deviance. We sought to sidestep some of the limits of representational analysis that have plagued scholars and critics of black experiences, the problematic that, for example, led Hortense Spillers (2003) to make her famous comment that "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, unseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb (emphasis ours). Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues." (153). The equation of black sexuality with pathology has led others to engage in an ambivalent politics of refusal, in which representation is blocked, as in Lorna Simpson's famous image "Guarded Conditions" in which a black woman stands with her back to the camera. Of course the limits of this are painfully clear: if no image of black gender or sexual difference can fully escape the weight history of racial violence, then the only image is no image at all. Therefore, while engagements with or refutations of the equivalences between black genders and sexualities and pathology or shame are necessarily ongoing, we do not want to revisit those key and still informative (if often only of the anxieties and desires of white cultural imaginaries) controversies about fractured black families, promiscuity, welfare, sexual precocity, and penis size.

This is not to say, of course, that we were unaware of the work that has been done in this area since the 1970s (or earlier, depending on

how you periodize black studies more broadly—obviously folks like Ma Rainey and James Baldwin had quite a bit to say prior to the black cultural nationalisms of the '60s and '70s). Our own efforts here, like those of so many others, owe a good deal to those who have gone before us, especially the pioneering work done by black feminists and other feminists of color (Davis 1983; Hooks, 1999; Hull et al. 1982; Hill Collins 1999; Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 1983), as well as the work that has emerged over the last two decades that has documented a growing synergy between critical race and what has come to be called critical queer studies (Eng 2001; Ferguson 2004; Holland 2000; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Cohen 2001). Like many of the cultural producers parenthetically listed above (an admittedly truncated list), we had taken seriously the call for intersectional approaches proffered by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), while also recognizing the ways intersectionality continues to prove so elusive to realize. Thus, even if we've resisted framing our intervention as one that begins and ends with racism, race as obviously not incidental to the studies of genders and sexualities these articles offer. Our point, though, is that black sexuality does not belong only to public policy or to racist or anti-racist discourses; black sexuality, like sexuality writ large, is so important and interesting (to think about or even to do), in addition to being so analytically difficult, because it is effectively everywhere, permeating all aspects of cultural life, including the spheres of mainstream political and popular culture and transnational black diasporic spaces.

Rather than begin, then, from what might be called a position of “racial paranoia” that would shape and guide our efforts only in relation to racism, we began from a reparative one (Jackson 2008; Sedgwick 2003). Eve Sedgwick, in an important essay, “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading,” argues that the “hermeneutic of suspicion” in which most intellectuals and academics are trained has mutated into an injunction to be paranoid, a methodological imperative. Yet, as she puts it, “For someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (2003:124). That is, the fact of racism is not the only thing that might make black genders and sexualities special. And knowledge of the metacultural power of racism doesn't necessarily lead to critiques that take it as a point of departure and arrival. Reparative reading, in contrast, might be about healing—echoing many of the calls that accompany calls for reparations—but it is also about what Sedgwick evokes as “queer possibility” (147). In a series of ongoing and forthcoming works, José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 2002) offers astute and hopeful critiques of the

queer possibilities and art of making do that are embedded in ordinary life in ways that don't necessarily undo or even directly contest the oppressive structures (racism, gender normativity) that so preoccupy paranoid thinking. Many of the essays in this issue share this sensibility, grounding black genders and sexualities in everyday (if also interstitial) spaces without fixing them, offering partial views into the ways identities and practices tied to gender performativity or sexual practice are dispersed throughout larger social fields and crystallizing in particular places and time, particular bodies or networks. In short, the essays included here often gesture toward a something or somewhere else, another site in which genders and sexualities congeal without foreclosing other possible iterations. The openness that accompanies the utopian impulses of queer possibilities leads us to speculate that the emphasis on hopeful possibility might be as much a black cultural value as a queer one.

The queer of color critique in which our own work is situated, then, remains both an emergent and ongoing project, one that continues to proliferate even as it resists neat categorization or institutionalization (something that is both wishful and unlikely given the degree to which queer theorists, after more than two decades at the "cutting edge," have yet to find institutionally stable homes). We hope that this special issue might contribute in its own way to this body of work by offering new scholarship that seriously and creatively evidences and explores the mutual imbrication of categories of difference like gender, sexuality, nation, race, and class, among others. The emergent scholarship on black genders and sexuality across the diaspora that we offer here locates these axes of differences within broader fields of knowledge, politics, and history. Put plainly, we looked for and found important new work that operates to both queer black studies and orient this queering toward local and transnational politics and practices, activist, academic, and otherwise. Yet if readers suspect a gap or absence here it is not, as it might first appear, heterosexuality. Indeed, if we understand heterosexuality as a meta-cultural project that coheres through aspirations and ideals as well as a range of social institutions, then it is in fact a sort of ever present or haunting shadow that each of the essays grapples with in more or less explicit ways. No, there's nothing particularly special about the lacuna we've identified as most troubling: if anything is missing it is work that foregrounds actual sexual practices. And while this is, perversely, a familiar problem for many studies of sexuality, the absence of the sexual or sexy in the work we've assembled in this volume is one we hope to remedy by exploring embodied sensuality more fully in the next issue.

The response to our call exceeded our expectations and a single volume "special issue" quickly morphed into two. The works we have

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decided to include cut across the humanities and social sciences. Some offer innovative theoretical approaches, while others present data from fieldwork.

Two works examine popular cultural texts. Riley C. Snorton examines the “ghettocentric imagination” at play in R. Kelly’s episodic musical soap opera, *Trapped in the Closet*, while Mark Foster critiques the documentary on black boxer Emile Griffith, *Ring of Fire*, for the ways it eludes a serious contextualization of his identity as a black Caribbean man in favor of the established narrative of “the closet.” Arguing that the model of the closet that the film employs is inadequate, Foster instead situates the film against the backdrop of what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls “homo-nationalism,” the complex interaction between nationalism, racial difference, sovereignty, and a national heterosexuality that includes homosexuality as a mark of national exception(alism). Snorton likewise argues that in Kelly’s (still?) ongoing saga, black sexuality emerges as a congeries of class and gender relations, performatively enacted affective scenarios, the musically saturated history of black expressive culture, and a meditation “that inextricably ties black sexuality to queerness in the popular imagination”[page]/If Foster pushes against the limits of the closet metaphor, Snorton multiples its meanings.

Two essays draw an ethnographic method to examine the performance of female masculinities and the interface of these performative gender identities with state-run agencies. In Aimee Cox’s essay “Thugs, Black Divas, and Gendered Aspirations,” she draws on her own experiences working in a Detroit Fresh Start social service agency and interviews with residents with whom she worked to look at the ways neoliberal social service policies “constrain the possibilities for self-identification and sexual expression” among poor and working class women (page). At the same time, Cox highlights how these women find creative ways to negotiate these gendered aspirations, including the enactment of a range of oppositional masculine stylings. The themes addressed in this article are critical to considerations of how state institutions and neoliberal models of social service shape, albeit unevenly, the possibilities for self-identification and sexual expression among individuals living in under resourced urban communities of color. Tanya Saunders also explores the relationship between female masculinities, normative models of gender, and the state. In her article, she documents the strange life of Grupo OREMI, a lesbian social services group originally funded by the Cuban government, only to have the support later withdrawn when the success of the program became too visible, and the increasingly large gatherings of women, especially poor and non-gender-conforming women, exceeded socially acceptable bounds of propriety and tolerance.

*Souls* typically includes a “First Person” narrative. In this issue, Ashon Crawley’s “Can You be BLACK and Work Here?” offers a polemic that draws on expressive traditions of black aurality to reflect on his departure from a gay and lesbian non-profit and the consternation his departure, as well as his communication with leaders in the organization, generated. Crawley’s work is an experimental and experiential account of black queer embodiment in conflict with white gay homonormativity.

In addition to the “First Person” essays that *Souls* typically includes, we have also introduced a new category called “Interventions.” Here we wanted to include shorter pieces that might relate the findings from fieldwork or engage in a polemic. Da Silva and Blanchette’s “Sexual Tourism and Social Panics” details how these two anthropologists came to be involved in working with the Brazilian Prostitutes’ Network, an advocacy group that has increasingly come to challenge the ways state policies position prostitutes as victims of sexual tourism, an identification which in fact makes them more vulnerable to surveillance and police harassment.

Taken together these essays frame black genders and sexualities as special in the ways they are embedded in the ordinary texture of life yet tied to larger social imaginaries, institutions, and ideologies, rather than only as a special problem.

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